

"Heaven is a Place Called Rockford"

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Two groups of people live in Laos: the Laotians who speak Lao and the Hmong, a mountain people who speak their own language. Both came to Illinois as refugees in the late 1970s. The Hmong, however, frequently joined their families in Wisconsin.

At the end of the Vietnam War, the Communists took over Laos, ending the Royal Lao regime. The Laotians who had opposed the Communists trusted no one. People feared being killed and many were placed in reeducation camps, which were really concentration camps. Over the next three years, 200,000 men, women, and children sought safety in Thailand. They settled in refugee camps, along the Lao-Thai border. Families of eight to ten lived in tents. From these camps Laotians settled in countries like Germany, France, and the United States.

About 100,000 ethnic Laotians came to the United States as refugees. Many Laotians settled in Rockford, Illinois. In 1980, 782 Laotians lived in Rockford. By 1990, they numbered 843. In 2000, they numbered 1,176. Laotians largely accounted for the thirty-seven percent increase of Asians in the Rockford area between 1990 and 2000 (see figure).

The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and Catholic Charities helped settle Laotian families in the area around Zion Lutheran Church. In 1979, Zion first reached out to the immigrants in its neighborhood. The next year, the church began English classes for the Laotians.

In Laos, Khamphou Sisouphanthong worked at the American Embassy as a telephone technician. The embassy paid him to attend English language classes. He now wishes that he

had paid more attention. But at the time, he thought his life was "pretty good." He had worked for the embassy for ten years when one day, while driving a truck, he realized he was being followed. His friends were spying on him. Now, he could trust no one. Soon a friend told him his name was on a list circled in red. So he left. "I felt blind not knowing where I was going to go or what country I'll end up in. You never plan to leave. You don't care. You leave to save your life."

Sisouphanthong arrived in the United States on January 14, 1977, first working at an ice cream factory in Pennsylvania. "When I was on break you could eat as much ice cream as you wished." He then moved to Elgin, Illinois, to be near friends from Laos. He came to Rockford in 1978, for a job at Borg Warner on Harrison Avenue. Sisouphanthong was laid off in 1982. During that year Zion Lutheran Church needed a translator to work with the Laotian refugees. "Pastor Denver asked me, 'What do you do for work?' I replied, 'I'm laid off.'" Pastor Bitner then invited him to work for Zion as a refugee coordinator since he had "pretty good English."

When Zion members first heard of a family's arrival in Rockford, they immediately visited and helped them settle into their new life. Sisouphanthong worked to find them employment and to enroll their children in school. He helped in dealing with courts and other institutions. Sisouphanthong eventually went to the seminary and became the first Laotian pastor in the world.

Zion helped Laotians open shops through the newly established Zion Development Corporation. Sopha Manivong came to Rockford in 1983 and in eighteen months opened a TV repair shop on Seventh Street called "Sopha Electronic Service." Zion Development Corporation also financed a shop run by volunteers where Hmong women sold Pa Dao (a form of reverse appliqué) and Lao women sold hand woven silk. Sonny Sisouphanthong opened a restaurant on

Kishwaukee Street. The Symphommarth family operates the restaurant Phainam on Broadway. There are also several Asian markets in the area.

The Laotians created their own religious institutions, too. They opened a Buddhist temple in 1985. The First Evangelical Free Church helped found the Lao Evangelical Free Church on Fourth Avenue in the mid-1980s. In 1996, Chantalang, a bilingual teacher at East High, started a Lao church meeting Sunday afternoons at Rock Church.

The traditional problems of immigration to America affected the Rockford Laotians. Even though their apartments had several rooms, families frequently slept in one room, which was their custom. They also slept on the floor even though there were beds. But the greatest difficulty came when the children learned English and spent more time away from the home and from their parents. Sonny, Sisouphanthong's wife, also a Laotian refugee, has seen parents come home from work but unable to help their children. They then feel so lonesome. She wonders, "What are we going to do in the next generation?"

The journey to America had many stories of tragedy and heroism. Sonny's parents sent her to live with her older sister at the age of six, when the Communists took over their village. In 1975, she and her sister escaped to Thailand. They arrived in the United States on December 22, 1979, to join a relative in Rockford. Sonny was 22 years old. "When I left, I could not tell anyone, even my aunt."

Sonny and Khamphou Sisouphanthong say it was God who brought them here. As she showed a map of Laos to her son and his friend, she told them to be grateful that they lived in the United States and had opportunities not available in Laos. She said, "Although we are different, we are not better, just different." This past summer Sisouphanthong called a friend from Laos who now lives in France. France limits the number of hours the husband and spouse can work a week. They are not allowed to take another job to get ahead. Sisouphanthong stated that God

had a purpose in bringing the Lao people here: "We are just like the story of Moses." He continued: "I love America. I am proud to be an American citizen." As another Rockford Lao refugee, Daokham Thammavong, said: "Being in America is like going to Heaven."

[From student historian's interview with Denver Bitner, Sept. 16, 2002; student historian's interview with Lois Dixon, Sept. 16, 2002; Health Systems Research, *1990 Census Data for NW Illinois*; *Rockford Register-Star*, Nov. 24, 1979; Jan. 11, 1980; Sept. 9, 1983; Dec. 12, 1985; Dec. 11, 1988; June 29, 1992; and June 20, 1999; student historian's interview with Khamphou Sisouphanthong, Sept. 25, 2002; student historian's interview with Sonesakoune Sisouphanthong, Sept. 25, 2002; United States Census Bureau, *2000 Census*; United Way, *Profiles of Community Characteristics: Winnebago County and Northern Ogle County, Illinois*.]